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AUTHOR Wolverton, Mimi
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ABSTRACT

Miami-Dade Community College's Teaching/Learning Project ties a comprehensive professional development program to a faculty-designed advancement system in an attempt to impact the classroom effectiveness of teachers and the quality of student learning. The program includes graduate courses offered in collaboration with faculty at the University of Miami, new faculty orientation and mentoring, and fully staffed resource centers on each campus. Courses in the project include two graduate-level courses, one on classroom assessment and the other on teaching and learning strategies, offered twice a year at three campuses. New faculty are required to take at least one course; others participate voluntarily. The effect of the courses has been substantial in shifting faculty attention to their own teaching styles. All new employees also go through formal orientation over 1 year including a 3-day preservice orientation and monthly or bimonthly workshops. This component was designed to integrate new members into a demanding bureaucratic system but has also been found to benefit the mentors themselves. The Teaching/Learning Centers on various campuses offer a variety of services. The faculty-designed advancement system compensates faculty who emphasize teaching and learning. The Project has had a significant positive impact on the institution as a whole. (Contains 13 references.) (JB)

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Miami-Dade Community College's Teaching/Learning Project

by

Mimi Wolverton

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Mimi Wolverton is currently serving as post doctoral fellow in educational leadership and policy studies at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona.

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Miami-Dade Community College's Teaching/Learning Project

Today's culturally diverse entrants to higher education often come academically underprepared, educationally naive and financially disadvantaged. They are older, work full-time and have family responsibilities. They stop-in and stop-out; and if they persist to the baccalaureate may take twenty-five years or more to do so (Cetron, 1994; Losak, 1990). This is particularly true of students who begin their academic careers at two-year colleges. The son or daughter of a college graduate, who enters a two- or four-year college directly after high school graduation, attends full-time, earns a degree in a reasonable amount of time and graduates with little or no debt, may soon be the exception rather than the rule. The imperative facing higher education is: How do we provide quality undergraduate education especially for this emerging nontraditional constituency? This paper describes the way in which Miami-Dade Community College (M-DCC) went about answering this question.

Miami-Dade Community College

Miami-Dade functions as a single college with five campuses scattered throughout Dade County, Florida. The student population of more than 55,000 is 52% Hispanic, 20% black non-Hispanic and 24% white non-Hispanic. Of its total student population, about 75% begin their studies at Miami-Dade with deficiencies in at least one scholastic area (Miami-Dade, 1993). An estimated two-thirds are first generation college-goers. Many receive some form of financial aid.

The college has a history of education reform. Its first wave of reforms were designed to assess and place students in courses where they could build the skills they needed for success in more traditional college level work. A core curriculum and a computerized advisement and articulation system were also added. In 1985, the college was designated the number one community college in America, a distinction which it still enjoys. In 1986, the institution embarked on the Teaching/Learning Project (Wolverton, 1994).

The Project ties a comprehensive professional development program to a faculty-designed advancement system in an attempt to impact the classroom effectiveness of its teachers and the quality of learning of its students. The development program includes graduate courses, new faculty orientation and mentoring, and fully staffed resource centers on each campus. The college pays all tuition and supply costs for those who enroll in the graduate courses; and new faculty receive a stipend for participating in orientation as do mentors for fulfilling their duties. The advancement system awards continuing contract, tenure, promotion and endowed teaching chair positions based on teaching portfolios. All project components, which once focused entirely on full-time faculty, have now in some way spilled over to affect adjunct faculty, administrators and support staff as well.

The Study

The study employs case study methodology. Three conceptual lens--strategic planning

(Bryson, 1988), total quality management (Deming, 1982) and systems thinking (Senge, 1990) help frame the study. Strategic planning allows the researcher to consider issues of efficient resource allocation and participative management, continuous quality--process effectiveness and customer service, and systems thinking--cultural transformation. To reflect emerging concerns in higher education, the systems model was expanded to take into account community-building and dialoguing-across-differences. Following each framework, a case chapter (as per Yin, 1989) explains what goes on at Miami-Dade. Data for these cases was gathered during two site visits over the course of a one-year period through observations and interviews, and from institutional documents and archival data such as self-studies, reports and a sampling of teaching portfolios. This material was sorted, collated and analyzed several times (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and drafts of the case chapters were shared with Miami-Dade representatives as a check for accuracy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The Teaching/Learning Project

The president at Miami-Dade began the project with a concept paper, which outlined his ideas about how M-DCC could build on its first-wave reforms to enhance the teaching/learning environment. He presented it at a retreat attended by more than 100 faculty and administrators; his only stipulation--endowed teaching chairs would exist. Everything else was up for discussion and debate. A steering committee and a series of subcommittees began by determining what assumptions and values serve as cornerstones for Miami-Dade. (Diversity and quality learning proved to be primary institutional concerns.) Using these findings as guides, they surveyed faculty, administrators and students to find out what faculty attributes contribute to student academic achievement at Miami-Dade and arrived at a list of twenty-nine characteristic behaviors. With this information in hand, they moved onto the professional development and advancement system components of the project. Widespread acceptance and ownership of the project's pivotal segment, the new advancement policy guidelines, were deemed so crucial that an outline of advancement system changes was brought before the faculty in a two-day referendum (Cross, 1993). In all, the committees worked on the project for five years before the final piece, the advancement system, was fully operational.

Professional Development: The Courses

In collaboration with faculty at the University of Miami, two graduate-level courses, one on classroom assessment and the other on teaching and learning strategies (especially those that are culturally specific), were designed to meet the specific needs of Miami-Dade faculty. Both are offered twice a year at sites on the college's three largest campuses. New faculty are required to take one of the courses as a condition of employment. Participation by others is voluntary. The effect of the courses has been substantial.

Surveys show that faculty and administrators, who successfully complete the classroom feedback course, tend to shift their emphasis away from exclusive attention to student achievement and learning skills and toward an assessment of their own teaching styles

(Cuevas, 1991). For instance, following his completion of the classroom assessment course, one faculty member began to invite fellow instructors into his classroom to collect feedback from his students, which he uses to improve what occurs on in the classroom. "This is probably the first semester where I have used tools to actually empower my students to feel more involved in their own education....I think that's great." His revelation about his experience seems similar to those of many of his colleagues. One offered this example, "Last summer I started paying closer attention to the way I write my tests and prepare students for them. After each test I now ask students two questions: Was the preparation for the test adequate? And, was the test fair and the format agreeable? I tell them--don't just say, 'I hated it,' and leave it at that, tell me what can be done to improve test preparation, the test format or the test questions....They're [the students] very happy with [this arrangement] and feel that they're learning much more. It shows in their progress."

A newly hired faculty member related the significance of the teaching strategies course. "You can take it for granted that one of the questions for new hires will be 'Can you function in multicultural environments?' and one of the things that the course made us aware of is the fact that students [from different cultures] learn in different ways." In addition, the course exposes participants to different teaching styles and the mechanics behind using such tools as audio and visual equipment and student participation and projects. "We bring back new ideas from the course....the rest [faculty] are starting to see that a lot more is going on now than did [a few] years ago." Many find that the greatest advantage to participating in either class comes from the opportunity it gives them to interact with other faculty. For these faculty the courses help them identify problems that students have in different departments and alerts them to how other faculty handle these problems.

Professional Development: Orientation and Mentoring

All new employees go through some sort of formal orientation. In the case of new faculty, the process extends over a one-year period and includes a three-day preservice orientation and monthly or bimonthly workshops offered through the Teaching/Learning Centers. One instructor commented, "It was great...we got a preview of what to expect at the college, we found out where the facilities are, even found out about the city." Another referred to "learning about [M-DCC] students, the multicultural issues, that was important to me. I'm from the mid-west and not used to such [diversity]." Still others spoke of "networking with other campus folks, with people from other departments...."

The original intent of the mentoring component of the project was to "integrate new people into a tough, bureaucratic system." The unintended beneficiaries, however, seem to be the mentors. One mentor described his new charge, "He's so alive; he's a great model for what good teaching is....I'm getting so much out of mentoring him." Another noted, "I sit in on their classes and they sit in on mine. I get observed every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I don't know if I am doing anything differently...but maybe because I have more people observe me, I do my act a little better. I say [to myself], 'What can I do today that they haven't already seen?'" A Teaching/Learning Center director says, "It's like they get a

shot of adrenaline."

Professional Development: The Teaching/Learning Centers

Center directors design workshops and seminars based on faculty needs and interests. Several centers, for instance, focus on computer training. Training that relates to the advancement system, however, occurs at all centers. In addition, faculty often seek the center directors' input on teaching strategies and course development. Mini-grants awarded through the centers to fund faculty-generated projects also help capture the potential for improving student learning in the classroom. As one instructor put it, "There are budgets for that now." A colleague described his current efforts, "I've submitted a proposal...for a mini-grant for research in conjunction with a project going on in the U.S. Department of Education on new ways to evaluate student behavior. I want to try my ideas out in a pilot study...." Without reservation, faculty on all campuses agree that the centers provide opportunities to exchange ideas and make friends with people they might not otherwise see. One department chair noticed an even more direct result of the project and its centers, "Faculty are thinking a little more about...whether their students are learning and how much...."

The Advancement and Reward System

To complement the college's faculty development program, faculty designed an advancement system that compensates faculty who emphasize teaching and learning. To demonstrate competency, faculty construct teaching portfolios, which are reviewed by faculty-dominated campus committees; the determination of contract continuation, promotion and tenure rests on the strength of these portfolios and the results of their assessment. At three-year intervals, faculty prepare portfolios, which include annual performance reviews, student survey summaries and self-assessments for three years, optional peer reviews and the answers to seven questions. The questions deal with issues of motivation, interpersonal skills, knowledge base and knowledge base application and include:

- What challenging goals have I set for myself, and what progress have I made toward attaining them?
- How do I motivate students or others whom I serve?
- How do I interact positively with colleagues and students?
- How do I create a climate conducive to learning?
- How do I update my own knowledge, professional skills and resources to make my instruction or service meaningful (professional growth activities)?
- How do I meet or support the individual learning needs of students? and,
- What information do I have that shows my students' achievement or the effectiveness of my service? (TLP, 1993).

Answers must be documented with specific classroom-related materials. Classroom faculty add course syllabi, examples of tests and other assessment devices, descriptions of teaching strategies and samples of student achievement or a description of how the teacher

knows that his/her students have achieved. Nonclassroom faculty (for example, librarians) provide samples of informational materials, discussions of applicable projects and activities, and substantiation of any of the classroom requirements that pertain to their specific situations (TLP, 1993).

As a part of professional development, faculty receive instruction on how to prepare portfolios; and department chairs undergo extensive training in how to conduct performance reviews. To encourage the participation of veteran faculty in portfolio preparation--especially those at the rank of full professor--in the inaugural run of the system (Spring 1992), the college added a $3,500 increase to the base salary of those who successfully completed the process.

Typical faculty reactions to the portfolio process go something like this, "We now have indicators, standards that establish teaching as a priority....Standards that cross all teaching disciplines....I am reviewing everything, I have to look at these [originally twenty-nine attributes, now questions] from a different perspective, a different angle, and it keeps me on my toes." Academic deans, who see all portfolios, agree that they detect a difference in the quality and the kinds of things that the new faculty (who have taken the graduate-level courses) submit--a level of sophistication in terms of how they approach teaching that is absent in many of the portfolios submitted by tenured faculty.

To recognize teaching excellence, the college awards endowed teaching chairs (also determined by a faculty-controlled committee, this time a college-wide one). Faculty compete for the endowed chair positions, and eligibility is restricted to full professors who have been Miami-Dade for at least six years. A faculty member explains, "Most colleges that offer endowed teaching chairs award them to people from outside the institution. They come in, visit for a year, get a lot of money, and then leave. What we've done is start a program that rewards our own people for being good in the classroom." Approximately one-third of the 100 three-year positions are awarded annually. Each chair carries with it a $5000 yearly stipend plus $2500 expenses per year, both to be used at the faculty member's discretion (TLP, 1992).

Although it no longer awards promotion and tenure based on degree attainment, Miami-Dade's new advancement system still acknowledges the attainment of a doctoral degree as a form of excellence. It does so by adjusting the recipients base salary by $2,000.00 to reflect the accomplishment. From that point forward all salary adjustments are made with this new base in mind. "The program allows us to earn a doctorate degree with very little expense (we can count the two graduate courses) and then rewards us when we're done."

The Influence of the Project on the Institution

To understand the full impact of the project, we must consider its effect on areas like resource allocation, college personnel other than faculty and operations. In the first case, in addition to the base salary increases, which directly affect the operating budget, fiscal

resources were in some cases realigned to support the new processes and in others generated from outside sources. In its most active years when committee work was high, the project's budget stood at $220,000 to 230,000 per year. As subcommittee activity diminished, the Teaching/Learning budget decreased proportionately. Overall, campus-specific staff development budgets, which are channeled through the Teaching/Learning Centers, increased by just under 20%. Capital budgets for each campus were redirected to allow for the construction of faculty offices--an issue raised early in the project by faculty. Few had areas in which they could consult in private with students, and many felt that this inhibited their ability to deal effectively with their students. The cost to date--about $1 million. In addition, the college built a privately supported $7.5 million endowment to fund the teaching chairs and a $108 million endowment, supported by a county tax referendum, to supplement state appropriations and dollars raised through tuition charges.

In the second, as the project progressed, employees in every work area of the college began to understand that how they performed their duties impacted Miami-Dade's learning environment. For instance, complaints about dirty classrooms, faulty equipment and burned out light bulbs led to the realization that support staff had an important role to play (McCabe and Jenrette, 1990). As a consequence, today, part-time faculty, staff and administrators participate in either the same or similar professional development programs as do full-time faculty. All new employees receive stipends to reimburse them for taking part in orientation programs. All benefit from college-sponsored mentor relationships, which extend anywhere from three months to one year. Staff and administrators now function under advancement systems similar to the one designed for full-time faculty and can garner awards for outstanding contributions to the learning environment that resemble those earmarked for full-time faculty. A two-tiered pay and support system for adjunct faculty (where those who wish to spend more time working with students would receive more money and higher levels of professional development) is currently under consideration.

And finally, in the case of college operations, as support staff became more active in the project, they also became more involved in collegewide decision making. In 1992, following their inclusion on the Teaching/Learning steering committee, support staff representatives were included (along with administrators and faculty) as voting members of the president's council, Miami-Dade's primary decision making body. At about the same time, the district office was reorganized in order to place more emphasis on teaching/learning. One vice presidential position was eliminated and a new one created, which ties institutional research, the Teaching/Learning Project and M-DCC's budgeting process together. In addition, campus leaders were given more autonomy in campus budgeting and personnel considerations and in determining individual campus direction.

In its most recent move, the college expanded employee involvement in budget decisions. As one instructor put it, "My perception in coming here was that consultation with faculty [and staff] on broad issues was the norm, but now that I'm here, I get the impression that this is not the case. I get the feeling that the discussions currently going on about the referendum funds [for instance] are a new experience." The instructor continued, "It appears

to me that project is out in front of the rest of the institution and other things are just starting to develop. There's sort of a cultural lag between the two." An academic dean agreed that this increased involvement in decision making is "a new trend that came with Teaching/Learning."

What Other Colleges and Universities Can Take From the Miami-Dade Experience

All organizations are unique. As such, they need not, in fact probably cannot, copy what Miami-Dade did. But certain insights gained from Miami-Dade's experience may serve as a starting point for colleges that are striving to improve their teaching and learning environments. First, a project of this nature cannot be carried out in isolation--isolation from the rest of the institution or from other attempts to improve the learning environment. In effect, Miami-Dade is an institution in the midst of overall organizational change. The college, in fact, restructuring itself to focus all its decision making on its core process--learning. Likewise, efforts to change the classroom environment must build on reforms that are already in place because certain aspects of the learning environment support others. Institutions with missing student, faculty development or rewards components need to consider ways to fill the voids.

Second, not everyone will participate and that is alright. Miami-Dade's relatively high participation probably stems from the pay incentives attached to the first portfolio go-round, enrollment in the graduate-level courses, and its mentoring and orientation initiatives. Finally, the *people* at Miami-Dade began by clarifying what Miami-Dade, the *institution*, holds important. The institution's stated values place the concepts of learning, diversity and quality into an inseparable triad that the institution has consciously sought to weave into the very fabric of the organization. Whether other colleges and universities bind the same three imperatives together in a similar fashion, however, may be less crucial than the act of determining what institutional members view as important and what their organization's notion of quality is.

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